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The spontaneous co-creation of comedy: Humour in improvised theatrical fiction

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates humour strategies in improvised theatrical fiction. Improvised theatre is a type of data that has thus far remained unexplored by linguistic studies, but which provides interesting insight into the characteristics of fictional texts and, more specifically, into the relation between dialogues in fiction and dialogues in spontaneous conversation.

The starting point for the analysis is the participation framework of improvised theatre, which is compared to the well-studied participation framework of telecinematic discourse. The comparison of the two types of data identifies a number of crucial differences between their participation frameworks, such as the co-presence of the audience during text creation, an emphasis on the production process, and the temporal proximity between text production and reception. These differences form the background of the discussion of three humour strategies that are typical of improvised theatrical fiction, namely metafictional frame breaking, non-contrived humour and the co-construction of humorous exchanges. The analysis shows that these strategies are closely related to the characteristics of the communicative framework that set improvised theatrical fiction apart from scripted fiction, such as telecinematic discourse. This demonstrates that humour strategies are dependent on the communicative framework of the text type in which they are used.

1. Introduction

Humour is a central aspect of many types of fiction. It takes different forms and is a key characteristic of a broad range of genres, from Shakespeare's comedies to Pope's satirical poetry, from comic strips to animated films, from sketch comedy to sitcoms. Unsurprisingly, the study of humour in fiction has become a research topic that has attracted an increasing number of studies over the years (e.g. Brock, 2016, 2015; Dynel, 2016; 2011a; Jabłońska-Hood, 2015; Messerli, 2016; Stokoe, 2008). However, one area of fiction has remained unexplored so far – the study of humour in improvised fiction. While most fiction is scripted, some forms are produced spontaneously. Studying such spontaneously produced forms of fiction provides new opportunities for observing the creation of fictional humour, and it raises new questions concerning the relation between humour strategies in fiction and humour strategies in other contexts, such as spontaneous conversation.

In this study, I will analyse humour in one type of spontaneously produced fiction, namely recordings of improvised theatre performances. This is a type of data that has remained largely unexplored in the field of linguistics (for a few exceptions, albeit without explicit focus on humour, see Pietropaolo, 2016; Sawyer, 2016, 2003), but which provides interesting

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insight into the characteristics of fictional texts, as well as into the relation between dialogues in fiction and dialogues in spontaneous conversation. Improvised theatre shares characteristics with both; like scripted fiction, it is fictional, which means that it is addressed to an audience that it aims to entertain, move, or otherwise please. And, like spontaneous conversation, it is produced without any options for planning, editing or revising the text, thus making it possible to observe how texts are created. As a consequence, improvised theatre provides exciting opportunities for linguists to identify continuities between spontaneous conversation and scripted fiction, and, on an even broader level, to gain new understanding about the nature of spontaneous language production and composition practices. As far as humour is concerned, improvised theatre provides ample material for analysis. It integrates strategies known from scripted fiction and from spontaneous conversation, in addition to strategies that appear to be specific to improvised theatre.

I compare improvised theatre to television series, with which it shares a number of crucial characteristics. In their most typical form, both improvised theatre and television series are aimed at an audience looking for light entertainment. This differentiates the two forms from scripted theatre, which – at least at the most professional and prestigious end – tends to have a somewhat more highbrow audience orientation. Indeed, evidence for the similarity in audience orientation of television series and improvised theatre can be found in the fact that Netflix recently released a collection of three performances of the improvisor duo *Middleditch and Schwartz*, alongside films and television series, which constitute most of the content on the platform.[1] Additional similarities between the improvised theatre studied here and television series are that both present fictional content in the form of coherent narratives and that these narratives are performed by actors. This distinguishes the two forms from some of the other forms of comedy, such as stand-up, which may include narrative elements that are acted out, but which more typically takes the form of "a punchline-peppered monologue" (Meier and Schmitt, 2017, p. xxiii). These similarities make television series a suitable point of comparison for improvised theatre.

The main aim of this study is to gain new insight into the ways in which humour relies on and exploits the specific characteristics of the participation framework of a given communicative form. Previous research on humour in fictional television genres has shown some of the ways in which genre-specific humour strategies can rely on certain aspects of the participation framework (see Brock, 2016, 2009; Dynel, 2016; 2011a; Messerli, 2016). By expanding the perspective to improvised theatre, additional aspects of the close relation between participation framework and humour strategies become apparent. The recognition of this relation not only enhances our knowledge of humour in improvised theatre, but it contributes to a more profound understanding of the systematic differences in humour strategies in fiction more generally and, even more broadly, across different forms of communication. Furthermore, by taking into account both similarities and differences between the participation framework of communicative forms, it is possible to observe parallels and continuities in humour strategies across these forms and to describe them in a systematic way. Last but not least, the study of improvised theatre addresses the lack of research on improvised fiction and the resulting conflation of characteristics of fictional texts with characteristics of scripted text production.

After an introduction to the type of data under investigation in Section 2, Section 3 will describe the participation framework of improvised theatre in comparison to the well-studied participation framework of telecinematic discourse, i.e. the language of film and television (Guillot, 2017; Hoffmann and Kirner-Ludwig, 2020; on the use of the term telecinematic discourse, see also Piazza, 2011). This comparison will identify a number of crucial differences between the participation frameworks of the two types of data. In Section 4, I discuss three humour strategies which are typical of improvised theatre: Metafictional frame breaking, non-contrived humour, and the co-construction of humorous exchanges. As I will argue, all three strategies are closely related to characteristics of the participation framework that distinguish improvised theatrical fiction from telecinematic discourse, which explains why the strategies are much more typical of the former than of the latter. However, I will show that it would be wrong to believe that the strategies cannot be found in telecinematic discourse at all. Rather than being exclusive to improvised theatre, the same or very similar strategies can be found in television series, even though they may play a more marginal role there. This demonstrates that the study of improvised theatrical fiction can result in new perspectives on other types of fictional texts, too.

2. Improvised theatrical fiction[2]

Improvised theatre, often called improv, is an art form in which performers improvise scenes spontaneously, without any time for planning and revision.[3] The scenes are created collectively, and all performers share responsibility for the scene. Often the audience is asked for a suggestion that serves as an inspiration for the improvisers. There are many different styles and formats of improvised theatre, including competitions of game-based short scenes between two teams (known as "Theatresports" or "ComedySportz"), longer formats that integrate a collection of loosely related scenes, as well as entire improvised

[1] https://www.netflix.com/watch/81140289 (last accessed 29 October 2020).

[2] Unfortunately, there is very little previous linguistic research devoted to improvised theatre. As a consequence, many of the resources I quote in this section are practice books written by improvisers for improvisers.

[3] One of the consequences of the dearth of research literature is that it is surprisingly difficult to locate a suitable and concise definition of improvised theatre that could be quoted here. While some publications simply assume their readers to be familiar with improv, others provide definitions that do not meet the requirements of academic publications. Two of the more suitable definitions I found are: "Improvisation is getting on a stage and making stuff up as you go along" (Napier, 2015a, p. 1) and "Improv is theater without a script. The improvisers create characters, environments, props, dialogue, scenes and entire stories on the spot in front of the audience." (Harvard and Wahlberg, 2017, p. 12).

plays, lasting for any time between half an hour and two hours (Frost and Yarrow, 2016; for a general introduction to the history and different styles of improvised theatre, see Leep, 2008; Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008; Sawyer, 2003). Different groups tend to specialise in different formats and styles, and some groups even improvise plays in the style of specific playwrights and authors, such as improvised Shakespeare and improvised Austen.[4] Improvised theatre also varies with respect to the number of restrictions posed on improvisers. At the restrictive end of the scale, such as in game-based improv matches between two groups, the scenes may be subject to many restrictions and rules. For instance, certain games specify the number of words to be used in a sentence (Johnstone, 1999, p. 155), or certain sounds that have to be avoided (Johnstone, 1999, p. 188). At the opposite end of the scale, there are no such restrictions posed on improvisers and improvised theatre may appear to the audience almost exactly like the performance of a scripted play. This latter type is the type of performance investigated here.

In contrast to traditional theatre, neither costumes, props nor scenery are usually used in improvised theatre, although there are some exceptions, especially in the case of improvised plays done in a specific style, such as improvised Shakespeare. In most cases, however, improvisers mime objects such as props, doors and pieces of furniture. Likewise, improvisers may perform several different characters without any change in clothing. Instead, characters are distinguished from each other through different postures, facial expressions, voices and styles of speaking (for an overview of different strategies of creating characters in improv, see, for instance, Bernard, 2012).

In the kind of improvised theatre performances studied here, the performers improvise not only their dialogues, but also the plot, their characters and everything that goes along with it (for a detailed discussion of the various degrees and forms of improvisation in different types of performances, see Lösel, 2013, pp. 27–33). Those unfamiliar with improv sometimes suspect that performers might prepare certain bits and punchlines beforehand, trying to integrate them within an improvised frame. However, this is not how improvisation actually works. As Napier (2015a, pp. 25–27) explains, manipulating a scene to fit prepared material is extremely challenging – more challenging than simply improvising a scene from scratch. In Napier's words: "It's silly to try to improvise a scene while remembering beats, educate your partner to these beats, maintain a character, adapt the beats to the audience suggestion and given location, force your partner to go down the path you've chosen, and all the while make it look like you're 'making it up on the spot'. Why bother?" (Napier, 2015a, p. 26). In a documentary portraying the performers studied in this paper, TJ Jagodowski describes his improvisation with Dave Pasquesi in the following way:

> There is nothing worked out about it beforehand.
>
> We don't know anything, until we look at each other [on stage], and then we start to know everything.
> […]
> I trust him [Dave Pasquesi] implicitly. There is a lot of freedom given to me because I know I can do the littlest thing and he'll know. He'll see it and he'll know what it is and he'll react to it. (TJ Jagodowski in Karpovsky, 2009, p. 00:01:55–00:02:29)

Thus, close observation, interpretation of contributions by the scene partner, and meaningful reactions to them are the basic building blocks of improvised theatre.

Instead of preparing actual content, improvisers practice for performances by training to create scenes spontaneously. To do so, they apply a number of very basic principles to create scenes collaboratively. For example, a common exercise in improv is the "Yes-and-story" (Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008, pp. 59–60). Performers take turns in developing a story one line at a time, with the restriction that each line has to start with "Yes, and …". Each story is different from previous stories in terms of setting, events, characters and plot, but the underlying principle of accepting suggestions by others and building on them in a meaningful way remains the same. With this exercise, performers practice their skills in accepting each other's ideas and building stories collaboratively, without one person deciding the course of events on their own. Other areas of practice include, for instance, verbal wit, miming objects, and acting techniques for creating characters quickly and maintaining them for an extended period of time (Hines, 2016; for extensive lists of exercises for improvisers, see, for instance, Salinsky and Frances-White, 2008).

As in all types of spontaneous interactions, improvisers may draw on their personal experiences in creating scenes. TJ and Dave write:

> If we do not know what we are going to say, we should prepare ourselves by knowing all that we possibly can: the issues of the day, our own ideas, and so forth. The best way to prepare for improvisation is to experience life. And think: Think of everything. What do you think about this particular event? This particular point in history? This particular school of thought? [...] (Jagodowski and Pasquesi, 2015, p. xii).

In sum, this means that the basics of improvised theatre is the spontaneous response by the performers to what happens in a scene, informed by the performers' background knowledge and life experience. As such, it is very similar to spontaneous conversation. Both forms may involve references to previous experiences and, in some cases, may even involve individual ideas or utterances that have been produced in some similar form on a previous occasion, either on or off stage. However, there is no planning or pre-mediation involved in the interaction, no agreement beforehand on what is being discussed, on the direction the scene is going to take and no reciting of material prepared for the occasion. The similarity of improvised

[4] See, for instance, https://www.ioimprov.com/shows/improvised-shakespeare-chicago/, https://www.ioimprov.com/shows/improvised-jane-austen/ (last accessed on 5 November 2020).

theatre and spontaneous conversation in these respects is so pronounced that Sawyer analyses dialogues in improvised theatre as a model for understanding the collaborative nature of spontaneous conversation (Sawyer, 2003, 2016).

Improvised theatre provides highly relevant data for linguistic studies of dialogues across different types of discourse, since it combines the characteristics of spontaneously produced language with the characteristics of language in fiction (see Fig. 1). Like spontaneous conversation, it is produced without any options for planning and revision, and the performers are subject to the cognitive constraints of real-time language processing. This can result in production errors, misunderstandings and repairs, very much like in spontaneous conversation. At the same time, the language used in an improvised theatre performance is part of a work of fiction. This means that the representation of events is not subject to the same faithfulness claims that apply to non-fiction, that the texts are produced by professionals, who have undergone extensive training and, most importantly, that the texts are produced for an audience and with the aim to entertain, move or otherwise emotionally affect the recipients. Thus, in addition to transporting information, the text also fulfils functions typical of artistic texts (see Jucker and Locher, 2017, p. 4).

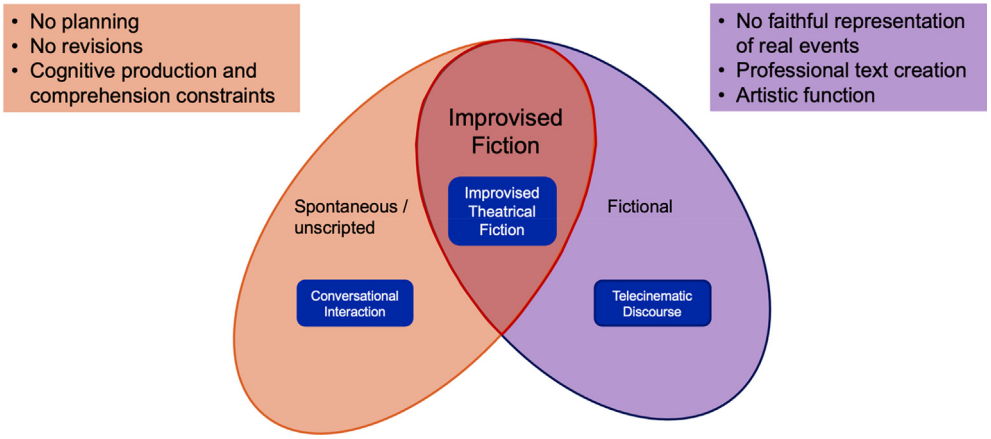

Fig. 1. Improvised Theatrical Fiction at the Intersection between spontaneous interaction and fictional discourse.

In this study, I will analyse recordings of performances by the American improviser duo *TJ & Dave*. The two performers, TJ Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi, specialise in improvised one-hour long plays. Their plays usually involve a small number of fictional characters, whom the plays follow in real time, focusing on the dynamics between them. Their style of improvisation does not pose any restrictions on performers and their plays look very much like scripted theatre. Jagodowski and Pasquesi are both professional actors and comedians and they are highly experienced improvisers, having performed as a duo on a weekly basis for more than fifteen years in Chicago and New York (Jagodowski and Pasquesi, 2015). They have also been on international tours and their London performance in 2017 was ranked as number 5 in the *Guardian's* top ten comedy shows of 2017 (Logan, 2017).

The study is based on eight recordings of the *TJ & Dave* show, which were performed in Spring 2015 at the iO theatre in Chicago.[5] The performances were professionally recorded with several cameras in front of live audiences. Post-editing of the recordings was restricted to selecting the best camera perspective for each sequence. Each episode was given a title after the performance, usually based on a theme that developed over the course of the play. All eight episodes were published on the video sharing platform Vimeo (https://vimeo.com/ondemand/tjanddave). Each episode lasts between forty-six and 66 min and the entire material amounts to 7 h and 24 min. An overview of all the episodes is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of video material.

Episode	Total duration
Episode 1: "Ass in your hand"	00:52:25
Episode 2: "Bonks"	00:53:45
Episode 3: "Blurting in earnest"	01:05:27
Episode 4: "Randino"	00:46:57
Episode 5: "Tout Suite"	00:56:09
Episode 6: "Governor's cup"	01:02:29
Episode 7: "A touch of the funky suitcase"	00:55:38
Episode 8: "Lady Beef"	00:50:55
Total	**7:23:45**

[5] Information concerning where, when and how the recordings were made is provided in the videos themselves as part of the title sequences and in the credits. Further information on the *TJ & Dave* shows can be found in a number of books written by and for improv performers, such as Jagodowski and Pasquesi (2015) and Napier (2015b), as well as in the documentary film "Trust Us, This Is All Made Up" (Karpovsky, 2009).

The eight episodes were transcribed, following the Santa Barbara conventions (Du Bois et al., 1992). The analysis of the humour strategies in the data was carried out on the basis of repeated viewings of all eight episodes. Researcher notes were taken concerning typical humour strategies that were observed in the recordings, i.e. strategies that occurred repeatedly and that were directly related to aspects of the participation framework specific to improvised theatre (see Section 3 below). All humour strategies that are discussed in Section 4 can be observed many times in each of the eight episodes. The main aim of this paper is to make a theoretical contribution by demonstrating the connection between participation framework and humour strategies; therefore, more descriptively-oriented studies of the frequencies of individual strategies are left for future research. For the discussion, representative examples were selected which clearly illustrate the strategies on the basis of short extracts from the transcriptions and, in one case, a screenshot.

To identify humour, I relied on audience laughter as an indicator of its presence. Of course, this is not a perfectly reliable method. In addition to the generally complicated relation between humour and laughter (see, for instance, Attardo, 2015; Holt, 2011), there are also a number of potential sources of over- and underreporting of humour connected to the nature of the data. For instance, the audience that was present when the performance was recorded may not have perceived a given sequence as humorous, even though someone else would find it humorous. Moreover, humour may have been perceived even though there is no audible audience laughter recorded on the video. In addition to these two sources of underreporting of humour, there could also be overreporting, for instance if audience laughter occurred due to sources of humour that were present in the audience area of the theatre, unrelated to the performance. However, overall, audience laughter appears to be a reasonably sound indication of perceived humour by the audience. It should be pointed out, though, that audience laughter in recordings of improvised theatre has a different status from canned laughter as used in sitcoms. While the former indicates humorous effect on the audience, the latter indicates humorous intent by the collective sender (see Messerli, 2016, p. 82).

The discussion of the examples is further informed by my extensive engagement with improvised theatre over a period of seven years. This included roughly 120 h of training in improvised theatre at the iO Theater in Chicago, the improv training centre and performance venue where TJ and Dave used to perform many of their shows, including those analysed here.[6] My stay in Chicago involved numerous informal discussions with many professional improv performers, including performers who had studied and/or performed with TJ and Dave as well as with the stage manager of the eight performances studied here.

3. Participation framework

The participation framework of improvised theatrical fiction shares many characteristics with the participation framework of fictional telecinematic discourse, but deviates from it in some crucial respects. In what follows, I will therefore briefly summarise the participation framework of fictional telecinematic discourse (Section 3.1), before describing how the participation framework of improvised theatrical fiction differs from the former (Section 3.2). The differences will form the basis for investigating humour strategies that are specific to improvised theatrical fiction (Section 4).

3.1. Participation framework of telecinematic discourse

A number of different models have been proposed in recent years to describe the participation framework of telecinematic discourse (e.g. Bubel 2008; Bednarek 2010; Dynel 2011a; Dynel 2011b; Brock 2015; for a recent overview, see Messerli 2017). What they have in common is that they all draw a distinction between two different levels of interaction (see Fig. 2). Communicative Level 2 refers to the interaction that is shown to take place between the characters of a fictional text, and, thus, it is sometimes referred to as the intradiegetic level of communication (see, for instance, Jucker and Locher, 2017, p. 2).[7] In contrast, Communicative Level 1, sometimes called the extradiegetic level of communication (see, for instance, Jucker and Locher, 2017, p. 2), refers to the interaction between the sender and the audience of a fictional text. In the context of telecinematic discourse, the sender not only includes the screenwriters, but also the directors, showrunners, actors, post-editors, and everyone else involved in the production of the film or television series.

[6] Unfortunately, the iO Theater announced in July 2020 that it would close its doors permanently, due to financial problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

[7] The boundary between the two levels of communication can be broken in cases of metafictional frame breaking (see Section 4.1 below). For instance, fictional characters in telecinematic discourse sometimes address the audience directly, a practice known as “breaking the fourth wall” (see, for instance, Brown, 2012). In these instances, a fictional character, positioned at Communicative Level 2, speaks to the audience at Communicative Level 1.

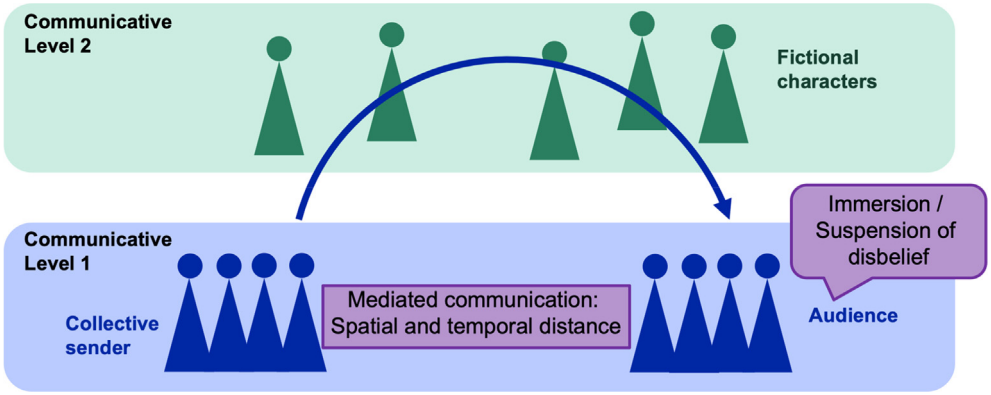

Fig. 2. The participation framework of telecinematic discourse.

While intradiegetic interaction on Communicative Level 2 can include all types of communication, the extradiegetic interaction on Communicative Level 1 is restricted to mediated communication, characterised by spatial and temporal distance between the collective sender and the audience. In addition, communication is unidirectional, taking place only from the collective sender to the audience. This means that the audience can act only as a recipient of the communication, but lacks any options of responding to the collective sender synchronously. Any response by the audience can only be received after the work of fiction is completed and, thus, it cannot influence text production in real time.[8]

Another characteristic of the communicative framework is the high degree of immersion of the audience (see Dynel, 2011c, p. 53; Kozloff, 2000, p. 47; Messerli, 2017, p. 37). The viewers immerse themselves into the fictional world and, instead of focusing on the production process of the work of fiction, they accept the illusion of reality that is created by it. This is typical of many forms of fiction and has been described as "willing suspension of disbelief" by Coleridge (1817, p. 2). Several exceptions to and restrictions on the suspension of disbelief have been pointed out, though. Dynel (2011b) introduces the concept of a metarecipient, a recipient "who watches a film as if from a privileged position, analysing its discourse consciously" (Dynel, 2011b, p. 1633). Such metarecipients include, for instance, linguists analysing the language of telecinematic discourse, film experts assessing a film's quality, but also film lovers with a special focus on specific strategies and techniques employed in a given film. Metarecipients are not engaged in any willing suspension of disbelief while they analyse the film. Moreover, it has been argued that some of the techniques and strategies used in telecinematic discourse indicate that, at least in some genres, audiences tend to be simultaneously immersed and still appreciative of discourse strategies at the extradiegetic level (Messerli, 2016, p. 85). For instance, Mittell (2015, pp. 40–53) discusses examples of television series that include an "operational aesthetic", which draws the viewers' attention to the techniques that are used in presenting the narrative. When discussing staged naturalness of scripted dialogues, Bublitz (2017, p. 256) speaks of viewers watching fiction "with a knowing and a feigning eye". A slightly different example of this can be found in instances of direct address to the audience by fictional characters (Kozloff, 2000, pp. 57–59; Landert, 2017, pp. 505–509), which breaks the illusion of immersion for the viewer. The audience's degree of immersion also appears to vary across different styles and forms of fiction (for implications on the participation framework, see Brock, 2015). For instance, Dynel (2011c, p. 53) points out the seeming paradox that theatre tends to lead to a lower degree of immersion than films, despite the fact that theatre tends to present stories with fewer shifts in location (and time), which would indicate more similarities with real–life interactions.

Several studies of humour in telecinematic discourse apply (variants of) the participation framework described here in order to characterise different humour constellations. For instance, Brock (2016) discusses how humorous intent is present or absent for various groups of participants in different communicative constellations. Similarly, Dynel (2016) describes different types of (un)intentional humour that rely on the recipient's position within the communicative constellation (see also Section 4.2 below). Messerli (2016) points out that humour in sitcoms can be signalled on either of the two communicative levels: on Communicative Level 2, through character laughter, and on Communicative Level 1, through laughter on the laugh track of a sitcom, leading to different humour constellations (Messerli, 2016, p. 83). The role of the two levels of communication is also considered by Brock (2009, pp. 180–181), who argues that certain types of humour through metacommunication in televised sketch comedy rely on the audience's interpretation of the utterance on the level of communication between comedians and TV audience (i.e. what has been referred to as Communicative Level 1 above). Dynel (2011a) identifies several strategies of sitcom humour that rely on the viewer's position within the participation framework, such as the use of characters' inner monologues that are accessible to the viewer but not to the other characters. Collectively, these studies indicate that the participation framework is closely connected to humour strategies.

[8] In Section 4.2 below, I will present an example of audience response to a television series that led to a reaction by the text producers, albeit through a different channel, Twitter.

3.2. Participation framework of improvised theatrical fiction

Like telecinematic discourse, the participation framework of improvised theatrical fiction consists of two different levels, the intradiegetic Communicative Level 2, on which the interaction between the fictional characters takes place, and the extradiegetic Communicative Level 1, on which the collective sender communicate the fictional text to the audience (see Fig. 3). However, there are a number of differences in the communicative constellation, some of which are highly relevant for humour strategies, as I will show in Section 4. In what follows, I will discuss these differences, using the prototypical case of television series as a reference point for telecinematic discourse. While there are some instances of television series – as well as other forms of telecinematic discourse – that deviate from the prototypical norm, for instance by allowing actors to create their own dialogues freely (see Bednarek, 2019, p. 50), such special cases are not discussed here. Nevertheless, such instances may present interesting material for future research.

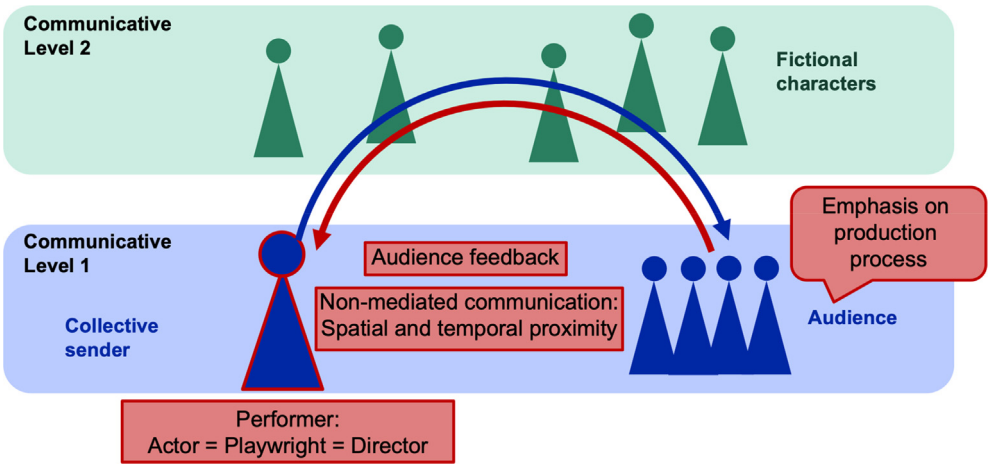

Fig. 3. The participation framework of improvised theatrical fiction.

The first of these differences concerns the fact that in improvised theatre, the performers are simultaneously the collective sender conceiving the fictional text and the actor who performs a character. This is different in telecinematic discourse. To use Goffman's (1974) distinction of animator, author and principal, one can say that in telecinematic discourse, actors are normally confined to the role of the animator, who speaks the words. The role of the author, who decides which words should be used, is shared by the screenwriting team, who write the script, and the director, who makes adjustments, along with the editing team involved in post-production. The role of the principal, taking responsibility for the message, can be seen to lie with the director, producer or the showrunner, who oversees the production. This division into distinct roles is certainly a simplification to the extent that, for instance, actors may have some liberty in deciding what to say when they perform their characters and some individuals may have more than one function in the production of a film or television series. Nevertheless, a division of roles can be assumed to be the norm in telecinematic discourse, especially concerning the division between animator on the one hand and author and principal on the other. In contrast, in improvised theatre, the actors decide on the message and its wording while performing a character. Moreover, given the real-time creation of the performance, there is hardly any time delay between conceiving of an idea, deciding on the wording of a line, and voicing it. In other words, performers in improvised theatre occupy the roles of animator, author and principal simultaneously. Or, as Harvard and Wahlberg phrase it, "[an] improviser on stage is an actor, playwright, director [...] all at the same time" (2017, p. 13).

The second difference relates to the audience's ability to provide feedback to the collective sender. The form and degree to which this is realised varies considerably across different styles of improvised theatre. In some cases, the audience is explicitly asked for their input, either to provide an inspiration for a scene or even to decide how the story unfolds. In the case of *TJ & Dave*, this does not happen. However, the audience still has options for providing feedback, ranging from (unsolicited) suggestions and comments to non-verbal feedback.[9] Emotional sounds and, most importantly, laughter are frequent forms of audience feedback in their shows.

[9] Heckling, a practice common in stand-up comedy, involving the harassment of performers by the audience, is far less common in improv.

A further difference relates to the lack of mediation. Unlike in most telecinematic discourse, the collective sender and the audience are co-present during the creation of the work of fiction.[10] This is a rather unique feature that sets improvised theatre apart from most other forms of fiction. For instance, while it may seem that improvised theatre shares this characteristic with scripted theatre, improvised theatre is set apart by the fact that the text is not only performed but also created in the presence of the audience. In combination with the previously discussed characteristics of the participation framework – the audience's ability to provide feedback and the unity of the performer's roles of principal, author and animator – this means that the audience's feedback can change the form and content of the fictional text. This is not restricted to short interruptions and detours from the main story; in extreme cases, audience laughter can completely change the direction of a story by drawing the performers' attention to promising storylines of which they might not have become aware otherwise.

The last difference in the participation framework that is of relevance for this study concerns the lack of immersion of the audience. In contrast to most genres of fictional films and television series, the audience tends to focus very much on the production process. Indeed, it is one of the main attractions of improvised theatre that the audience is able to witness the creation of the work of fiction. Salinsky and Frances-White (2008) refer to this as the "Skateboarding Duck Conundrum", meaning that the audience can become so absorbed by admiring the fact that improvisers are able to create a story spontaneously that they stop focusing on the content of the story. This focus on the production process means that audience members tend to retain a high degree of awareness of their physical surroundings in the theatre space, and that they often try to observe the techniques and skills of the performers throughout the performance.

4. Humour strategies in improvised theatrical fiction

In this section, I present three different strategies of creating humour in improvised theatre: metafictional frame breaking, non-contrived humour, and the co-construction of humorous exchanges. All three strategies are used repeatedly in each of the eight episodes I analysed, and all three are directly related to characteristics of the participation framework that set improvised theatre apart from telecinematic discourse and most other forms of fiction. As a consequence, the humour strategies I present are typical of improvised theatre. However, this does not mean that the strategies are exclusive to improvised fiction. Instead, I will show that the same or very similar strategies can also be found in television series, although they are less typical there. Moreover, I will show that one of the three strategies, the co-construction of humorous exchanges, has also been described for non-fictional spontaneous conversation.

4.1. Metafictional frame breaking

One of the typical strategies for creating humour in improvised theatre is metafictional frame breaking. Metafictional frame breaking occurs whenever the performers refer to or comment on the fact that they are performing a piece of improvised theatre. By doing so, they break the boundary between the two communicative levels, drawing the audience's attention away from the fictional world and directing it towards the creation process. There are different ways in which metafictional frame breaking can occur, and a more systematic analysis of this strategy alone would certainly be a worthwhile topic for study. For the purpose of the current paper, I will briefly describe some examples of metafictional frame breaking that can be observed in the recordings of *TJ & Dave,* leaving a more detailed study for future research.

First, metafictional frame breaking can consist of utterances that establish a correspondence between the fictional world and the here and now of the performance space. In Episode 2, "Bonks", TJ and Dave play two police officers at their office. At one point, Dave/Dave's character looks upwards towards the ceiling, to which TJ/TJ's character replies "that's gonna leak" (0:07:30). Since there is heavy rain pounding on the roof of the performance venue at this point, he creates a correspondence between the fictional world and the extradiegetic world. The audience responds to this breaking of the fictional frame with laughter, indicating that this is perceived as a source of humour.

A second way in which metafictional frame breaking takes place is through explicit comments on object work. As mentioned above, the two performers do not use props, but mime objects. In Episode 6, "Governor's Cup", the two performers play several scenes in which they talk on the phone, miming the phones (see Fig. 4). In one scene, TJ comments on Dave's miming skills, saying "you look so much like you're holding a fucking pistol to your brain" (0:08:56). In this moment, the performer speaks as actor rather than as character, destroying the illusion of the fictional world by drawing attention to the fact that the scene is acted. Again, the breaking of the frame elicits audience laughter.

[10] While some sitcoms are filmed in front of live audiences, the effect of the audience on the creation of the text is, in most cases, extremely limited. The large majority of sitcoms are scripted and audience reactions cannot influence the course of events.

Fig. 4. Still frame from *TJ & Dave*, Episode 6, "Governor's Cup", 0:08:56.

Other instances of metafictional frame breaking are realised by references to the performers' decisions with respect to developing plots and characters. In Episode 6, "Governor's Cup", one scene is taking place in the dispatch office of a taxi company. The two performers introduce a large number of different characters working at the office, until one of the characters comments on the fact that the office is overstaffed (1:00:23). The humour of the comment derives from drawing attention to the performers' decision to place such a large number of different characters in the dispatch office, which is not very plausible. In the same episode, one of the characters makes a negative comment on another character ("Sam bums me out", 0:19:43). The audience responds to this comment with laughter, which appears to be elicited by the fact that both characters are performed by the same actor. When he lets one of the two characters make a negative comment about the other, the performer draws attention to the fact that the two fictional characters, who do not get along with each other, were created by the same performer.

The fact that improvised theatre is not mediated, but created in the presence of the audience, makes it especially suitable for instances of metafictional frame breaking. This does not mean, however, that this strategy cannot be found in telecinematic discourse. For instance, Bednarek mentions two examples from the TV series *Glee* and *Mr. Robot*, in which characters engage in metafictional comments (2018, p. 62). Dynel mentions metafictional frame breaking as an "exception" to the general rule of immersion (2016, pp. 70–71; see also the discussion of immersion in Section 3.1 above). She argues that such devices tend to occur in certain genres, including highbrow dramas, mockumentaries and sitcoms. As mentioned in Section 3.1, different genres and modes of fiction vary with respect to the degree of audience immersion that they typically evoke. In sitcoms, the suspension of disbelief appears to be less pronounced than in some other genres, making metafiction more likely to occur as a humour strategy (Dynel, 2016, p. 71). Excerpt 1 from the series *Friends* shows a passage that is particularly rich in metafictional strategies. In this episode, Brad Pitt has a guest appearance as Will, who is an old high school friend of Ross' and who used to hate Rachel. When the episode was produced, Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston – the actor performing Rachel – were happily married in real life. Thus, introducing Brad Pitt's character as someone who hated Rachel creates humour. More laughter ensues after Will and Monica's greeting (see Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1: Passage from TV Series *Friends*, Season 8, Episode 9, "The one with the Rumor". Transcription based on https://fangj.github.io/friends/season/0809.html

```
((Brad Pitt enters as Will))
Monica: Hey!
Will:   Hey!
        Happy Thanksgiving!
Monica: Aww thanks! God Will I'm so glad that you came! You look great! You must've lost like --
Will:   150 pounds. Yeah, I'm gonna be in one of those Subway sandwich commercials.
```

Additional humour is created by establishing that Will, a character performed by an actor known for his good looks, used to be heavily overweight. This creates a contrast between the fictional world and the extradiegetic world and draws attention to the casting decision behind this character.

This example from the series *Friends* and the examples mentioned by other researchers presented above show that metafictional frame breaking can be used as a humour strategy in television series. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that such instances remain an exception, rather than the rule. They appear to be restricted to certain genres (e.g. mockumentaries) or occur in small numbers as marked instances of humour strategies in television series. In contrast, such instances of metafictional frame breaking can be observed repeatedly in all eight episodes of the data from *TJ & Dave*. Thus, while metafictional

frame breaking can be found in telecinematic discourse, it is facilitated by the participation framework of improvised theatre, making this a typical strategy of this form of fiction. More research into metafictional frame breaking as a humour strategy could reveal further continuities across different forms of fiction.

4.2. Non-contrived humour

Not all instances of humour are intended. While the distinction between intended and unintended humour seems quite intuitive, the notion of intent is, in fact, far from unproblematic (for a brief overview, see Dynel et al., 2016). For the current purpose, intentional humour will be understood to refer to instances of humour in which the speaker produces an utterance "with a view to amusing, i.e. inducing a humorous response in, the interlocutor" (Dynel, 2016, p. 72). This can be distinguished from unintentional humour, which refers to instances of humour in which there is a lack of intent to be humorous by the speaker. For instance, this can be due to the speaker's unawareness of the presence of humour or due to an unwillingness to present something as amusing (e.g. in the case of mishaps).

Distinguishing between humorous intent and humorous effect, Chovanec (2016, p. 94) illustrates four different constellations and the corresponding types of humour (see Table 2). Successful humour is the type of humour that is both intended by the speaker and recognised by the recipient. Failed humour is either unrecognised or resisted by the recipient. If humour is neither intended nor recognised, there is no humour; finally, if humour is not intended by the speaker but perceived by the recipient, this is incidental or unintended humour. Examples of this last type have been studied in a range of settings by different authors (e.g. Brock, 2016; Chovanec, 2016; Dynel, 2016; Messerli, 2016).

Table 2
Humorous intent (HI), humorous effect (HE) and types of humour (Chovanec, 2016, p. 94, p. 94).

Production side	Reception side	Type of humour
+HI	+HE	Successful (felicitous)
+HI	−HE	Failed (unrecognised/resisted)
−HI	−HE	None
−HI	+HE	Incidental (unintended)

The two-layered participation framework of fiction complicates the above distinction between successful, failed and unintended humour. Since there are two sets of participants on both the production and the reception side, both humorous intention and humorous effect can be present or absent for either of them. Thus, theoretically speaking, there are sixteen possible humour constellations overall, although not all of them may be equally plausible or relevant. In her study on accountability and intentionality of humour in telecinematic discourse, Dynel (2016) studies two such constellations. She draws a clear terminological distinction between the two different levels of intentionality, corresponding to the two communicative levels of the participation framework. While she uses "(un)intentional" for the level of fictional characters (Communicative Level 2), she uses "contrived" for the level of the collective sender (Communicative Level 1). Thus, intentional humour refers to instances of scripted humour in which the fictional character is presented as producing an utterance with humorous intent, whereas in unintentional humour the fictional character is presented as either being unaware or unwilling to amuse their interlocutor. In addition to instances in which unintentional humour is recognised by the fictional interlocutor on the intradiegetic level, she also includes instances in which the humorous effect is only perceived by the audience on the extradiegetic level (Communicative Level 1). Since the instances of unintentional humour studied by Dynel (2016) are included on purpose by the collective sender with the aim of amusing the audience, they are contrived on Communicative Level 1. Thus, the instances of humour she studies can be described as contrived unintentional humour – humour intended by the collective sender of the fictional text, but presented as being unintentional as far as the fictional character is concerned (see Table 3).

Table 3
Classification of contrived unintentional humour studied by Dynel (2016) (my own presentation).

	Production side	Reception side
CL 2 (intradiegetic level)	−HI *unintended*	+HE or −HE
CL 1 (extradiegetic level)	+HI *contrived*	+HE

While unintentional humour is very common in telecinematic discourse, non-contrived humour – i.e. humour not intended by the collective sender – is quite rare. This is a consequence of the fact that telecinematic discourse is very carefully composed and highly edited. While there are some television series, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which are based on dialogue improvised by the actors (see Bednarek, 2019, p. 50; Fox, 2017), spontaneous production to such a degree is not the norm. Instead, screenwriters produce carefully composed, edited and revised scripts, which form the basis of the performed scenes. Ample evidence of the amount of composition and careful consideration of the wording of dialogues in television

series can be found, for instance, in the interviews given by television screenwriters in the recently published volume by Bednarek (2019). Even in cases in which actors do not follow the script and produce "mistakes" or other instances of undesired utterances, there are plenty of opportunities to remove such passages during post-production. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that with all the different levels of pre- and post-production editing involved, there is hardly any type of spoken dialogue that is more carefully composed than dialogue in films and television series. Thus, even in the case of unplanned events or utterances during the shooting of a film, their humorous effects are still likely to be noticed. Blooper reels serve as an illustration that even mistakes and mishaps with humorous effects for the audience are regularly cut from the final product. Furthermore, if the unplanned sequence is not cut, the decision to include the material constitutes a form of intention of the collective sender, thus turning the instance into contrived humour. As a consequence, non-contrived humour, i.e. the inclusion of humorous material with complete lack of intention by any entity of the collective sender (including post-production), is a rare exception in television series.

This is quite different in improvised theatre. Due to the spontaneity of text production – the lack of planning and the absence of revision – the text is far less carefully composed and may very well include meanings and readings of which the performers are not aware. As a consequence, non-contrived humour is a common occurrence in improvised theatre. Theoretically, four different types of non-contrived humour are possible, depending on the presence and absence of humorous intent and effect onCommunicative Level 1 of the interaction between the fictional characters (see Table 4). However, the instances of non-contrived humour I observed in the data from *TJ & Dave* did not include any cases with humorous intention by the fictional character.[11] For humorous effect, both presence and absence of humorous effect on the fictional interlocutor were observed. There seems to be a preference for –HE, which is in line with the observation that humour in telecinematic discourse is often presented as not being perceived as humorous by the fictional characters (Dynel, 2011a; Messerli, 2016). However, a more systematic analysis would be needed to verify this parallel.

Table 4
Classification of non-contrived humour in improvised theatre.

	Production side	Reception side
CL 2 (intradiegetic level)	(+HI or) –HI	+HE or –HE
CL 1 (extradiegetic level)	–HI *non-contrived*	+HE

Of course, there are methodological challenges for identifying non-contrived humour, since studying a recording of improvised theatre does not always reveal the intention of the performer. As a consequence, it is often impossible to say whether a given utterance is an instance of contrived or non-contrived humour. However, there are cases in which a classification as non-contrived humour is highly plausible. Evidence of non-contrived humour can be found, for instance, in the form of laughter and meta-comments by the performers, which are not in line with the stance of the fictional character.

For all instances of non-contrived humour, there are different ways in which the participants in the communicative situation are alerted to the presence of humour. The first option is that one of the performers becomes aware of the humour and signals its presence, for instance through smiling, laughter, facial expressions, gestures or repetition. A combination of several of these signals can be observed in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2: *TJ & Dave*, Episode 3, "Blurting in Earnest", 0:07:51–0:08:10

```
01 TJ:   all baby mice are blind?
02 DA:   yeah when they're first born yeah,
03       (0.6)
04       i mean super baby,
05       (.) yeah,
06       (0.6) (squinting and quick upward movement of head)
07 >>> i mean, (smiling)
08 AU:   Audience laughter (1.2)
09 DA:   <@ extremely young. @>
10       @
12 AU:   Audience laughter (1.2)
13 TJ:   oh i like it.
14 DA:   that would be great,
15       (0.3)
16       that's a story.
17 TJ:   i like it.
18 DA:   <@ su- @>
19 TJ:   super [baby].
20 DA:         <@ [super] baby mice. @>
21 AU:   Audience laughter (5.7)
```

[11] This constellation, no humorous intent by the performer but humorous intent by the character, is not impossible, though. A situation in which this can occur is when a scene partner attributes non-intentional behaviour of the performer to the intention of the character. To give an example, in Excerpt 2, TJ could have established that Dave's utterance "super baby" was uttered in a context in which Dave's character wanted to make a joke. However, in the data analysed here, this type of humour was not observed.

Prior to this passage, the two characters were discussing baby mice and their (lack of) ability to flee from birds of prey. Dave's character mentions that baby mice are blind, which is questioned by TJ's character in line 01 of the excerpt. Dave's character then appears to argue that their blindness only affects the very initial phase of their lives, resulting in the formulation "super baby" (line 04). This formulation is explored for its double meaning in the following turns. While "super baby" was used to express the meaning 'very young', it could also be understood as a baby mouse with super powers, in analogy to Superman. During the pause in line 06, Dave appears to become aware of the potential double meaning of his formulation. He squints his eyes, makes a quick upward movement of his head, and smiles when using the discourse marker "I mean" to introduce the self-repair "extremely young" in line 09. This triggers the first instance of audience laughter in line 08. The audience laughter starts during "I mean" in line 07, but compared to the later laughter in line 12, fewer audience members seem to join in. Overall, Dave's communicative behaviour in lines 06 and 07 appears to alert the audience to the option of an alternative interpretation of the expression "super baby", which is then immediately perceived by some audience members, who start laughing in line 08, while others only seem to become aware of the alternative interpretation slightly later, joining the laughter in line 12. The subsequent lines by the two performers include meta comments ("that would be great", "I like it") and repetitions of the formulation "super baby (mice)".

The second option for signalling the presence of humour is through audience laughter. This takes place when members of the audience recognise humour before the performers do. Excerpt 3 shows an example of such an instance. In this passage, the two fictional characters are waiting in front of a meeting room in which a committee is taking a decision about whether or not their project proposal will be selected. The two characters discuss their prospects, in the course of which Dave's character utters the line "[in] some of [the scenarios we walk out of here with] our ass in our hand" (line 10). This is followed by a pause, during which a small group of audience members starts to laugh (line 12). The audience laughter signals the perception of humour and leads TJ to question the meaning of the utterance. This is followed by a long discussion of the expression "(leave with your) ass in your hand", only the beginning of which is included in Extract 3. Over the course of the following turns, the audience laughter increases with respect to the number of people joining in, the intensity of the laughter and its duration.

Excerpt 3: *TJ & Dave,* Episode 1, "Ass in Your Hand", 0:02:10–0:02:37

```
01 DA: that factor's in some of the scenarios.
02 TJ: yeah right.
03      (2.0)
04 AU: Audience laughter (2 single individuals 0.9)
05 DA: some of them we'll walk out of here our hat in our hand.
06 TJ: yeah right.
07      (0.5)
08 ??: yeah. (speaker unclear)
09      (0.7)
10 DA: one of them our ass in our hand.
11      (1.4)
12 AU: Audience laughter (small group 0.9)
13 TJ: what?
14 DA: yeah.
15      <ha-> ass in your hand.
16      (0.8)
17      ass in your hand.
18 TJ: [wh-]
19 DA: [your] ass in your hand.
20      (1.7)
21 AU: Audience laughter (medium group 1.3)
22 DA: hat in hand's one thing,
        ass in hand is another thing,
        it's worse.
        (3.0)
23 AU: Audience laughter (medium group 1.5)
24 TJ: what saying is that.
25      is that a saying?
26 AU: Audience laughter (large group 2.0)
```

The explicit discussion of the status of the utterance as an established saying or not points towards the unintentionality of Dave's use of a non-idiomatic expression that could give rise to humour. In the following minutes, the two performers/characters discuss possible meanings of the utterance, ending with Dave's recollection of the correct form of the saying, "(come with) hat in hand" (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4: *TJ & Dave,* Episode 1, "Ass in Your Hand", 0:03:54–0:04:08

```
01 DA: walk out with your hat in hand.
02      hat in hand.
03      hat in hand,
04      no you COME with hat in hand.
05 TJ: yeah,
06      to beg.
07 DA: you ARRIVE (.) with hat in hand.
08      you can leave however the fuck you want.
```

```
09        right?
10        (1.0)
11  AU:   Audience laughter(1.2)
12  TJ:   yeah.
13        (0.3)
14  TJ:   so we're not --
15        you're not --
16        well you're not even right about the one that you were SURE of.
17  DA:   NO.
```

In sum, the use of the expression "[walk out of here with] our ass in our hand" seems to have been used by Dave without the intention of creating humour through modifying an existing idiomatic expression. Like the example with the expression "super baby [mice]", this can be classified as an instance of non-contrived humour. Whereas the discovery of the humorous meaning of "super baby" was first signalled by Dave's communicative behaviour, the humour in "ass in our hand" was first flagged by audience laughter. Thus, either the performers or the audience members can become aware of and signal the presence of non-contrived humour.

As mentioned above, the fact that improvised theatre does not allow for any planning or revision makes it very susceptible to non-contrived humour. In contrast, telecinematic discourse, as one of the most edited types of language, is highly unlikely to include non-contrived humour. Still, there are cases of non-contrived humour in telecinematic discourse, too. One way in which they can occur is through a shift in the cultural context between the composition and the reception of the text, leading to different evaluations of the content or the techniques used in a given film. For instance, present-day audiences watching early horror films may find the film techniques and special effects used in them amusing. As a consequence, they may well perceive humour rather than feeling scared. Thus, the extent to which the collective sender can control the presence of humour depends crucially on the familiarity with the cultural background of the audience. In cases in which the background between the collective sender and the audience do not match, non-contrived humour is much more likely.

Another option for introducing non-contrived humour into telecinematic discourse is oversight. Despite the many levels of editing of films and television series and the many pairs of eyes trying to control every aspect of the final film, oversights still occur occasionally. A recent prominent example is the presence of a Starbucks cup in a scene of Episode 4 of the final season of *Game of Thrones*. Due to an oversight, the cup was left on the film set and ended up in the final version of the episode that was aired. This unintentional incongruity led to many online comments, articles and memes, many of which explored the humorous aspects of the mistake (see Fig. 5).

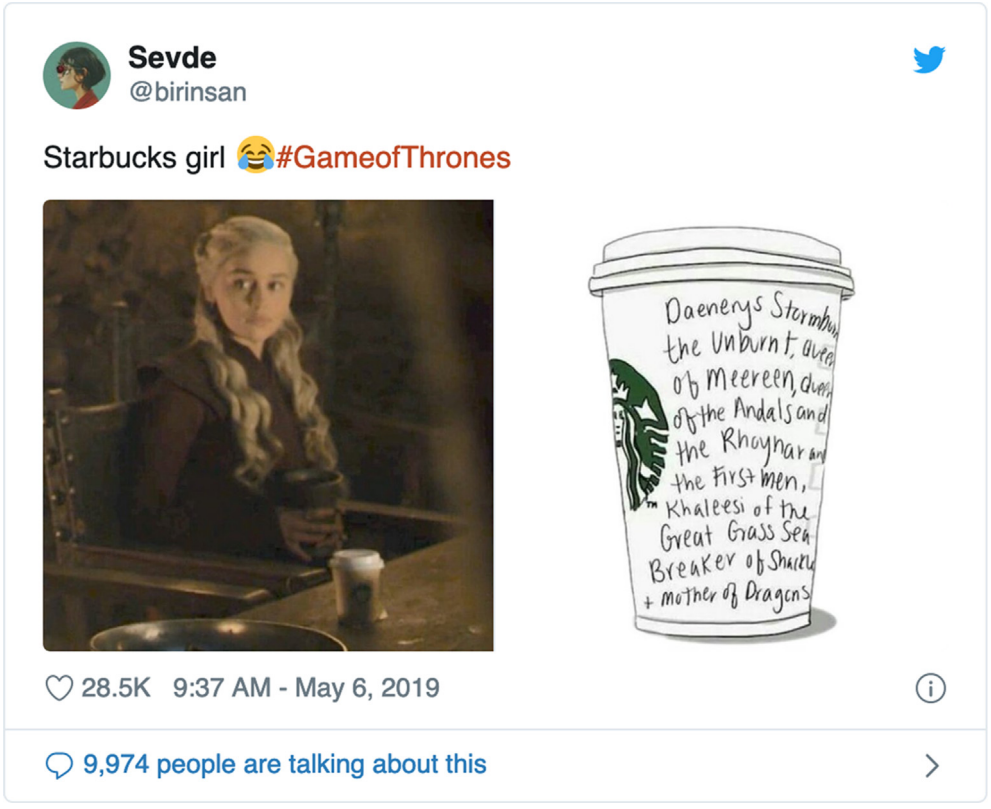

Fig. 5. One of many humorous tweets referring to the Starbucks cup in Game of Thrones (quoted from Schlosser, 2019).

The presence of such tweets shows that social media offer the audience an option for responding to the collective sender, despite the general unidirectionality of the extradiegetic communication. This is not unsimilar to other forms of mass communication, such as news media, where the audience can also use social media to respond to text producers in an otherwise largely unidirectional communication setting (see Landert, 2014). Despite this option for the audience to "talk back" to text producers, telecinematic discourse still differs from improvised theatre with respect to the influence of the audience contribution on the final product. Whereas in improvised theatre, the performers can be influenced by audience reactions while creating the fictional text, audience reactions in telecinematic discourse reach text producers only after the text is completed. Thus, the only way for text producers to respond to audience contributions in telecinematic discourse is outside of the fictional text, for instance through social media – an option used by the text producers of *Game of Thrones* in the case of the forgotten Starbucks cup (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Response by Game of Thrones producers to Starbucks cup mistake (https://twitter.com/gameofthrones/status/1125502368056053762?s=12, last accessed 23/12/2020).

To conclude, non-contrived humour, typically created through mistakes, oversights, and non-intended alternative meanings of utterances, is very typical of improvised theatre, in contrast to telecinematic discourse, where non-contrived humour is the exception. Moreover, the collective sender in telecinematic discourse can only respond to instances of non-contrived humour after the film has been broadcast, whereas performers in improvised theatre can build on instances of non-contrived humour within the same performance.

4.3. Co-construction of humorous exchanges

The last strategy that I am going to discuss here is the co-construction of humorous exchanges. In improvised theatre, the plots and dialogues are not scripted by a screenwriter; instead, they are created collaboratively by the performers during the performance. This means that each performer has equal rights to contribute to the scene and no one can control the events and dialogues by themselves. Thus, two of the most important skills of an improviser involve listening to the contributions of the other performers and building up on them in a meaningful way. As a result, we can find many passages in the *TJ & Dave* shows in which the two performers explore ideas collectively, often resulting in the co-construction of humorous exchanges. Examples of this were already included in some of the extracts presented above, for instance in the exploration of the meaning of the phrase "[to come here with] our ass in our hand". In this section, I will discuss another example, which focuses even more clearly on the collective heightening of an idea.

Excerpt 5 presents some context of the actual passage that will be at the centre of the analysis. The exchange is taking place in a shop. Dave performs the character of a shopkeeper, while TJ's character is buying a bottle of wine. This service encounter is humorously exploited by challenging the shopkeeper's question of whether the customer wants his purchase in a bag.

Excerpt 5: *TJ & Dave*, Episode 8, "Lady Beef", 0:19:14–0:19:34

01	DA01:	that's it?
02	TJ01:	yeah.
03	DA01:	you want it in a bag?
04		(4.7) (*TJ looks at Dave with a puzzled expression*)
05	AUDI:	*Audience laughter* (6.3)
06	TJ01:	yeah.
07		(1.5)
08		what's the other option?
09		(3.2)
10	AUDI:	*Audience laughter* (4.5)
11	TJ01:	what else are you going to put it in?
12	DA01:	it's a yes or no question.
13	TJ01:	okay,
14		yeah.
15	DA01:	okay.
16	TJ01:	but just out of curiosity,
17		what else were you going to put it in?
18		(1.4)
19	DA01:	no bag.

About 13 min later, the scene has shifted. Dave still performs the character of the shopkeeper, now interacting with another character (TJ02), who did not witness the service encounter in the shop. Dave's character recounts the earlier interaction and asks his interlocutor for his opinion concerning the response and possible alternatives to the bag he had offered. Together, the two performers offer a series of possible alternatives to a bag, starting with "a box" and "a cloth sack", then continuing with "gift-wrapped", and ending with "inside a human" (see Excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6: *TJ & Dave*, Episode 8, "Lady Beef", 0:32:45–0:33:32

20	DA01:	hey,
21		if i asked you <q do you want that in a bag? q>
22		(0.7)
23	TJ01:	[yeah]
24	DA01:	[what would] --
25		what would you do?
26		(1.7)
27	AUDI:	*Audience laughter* (2.8)
28	DA01:	it's like --
29		like selling you a bottle of booze and i say,
30		<q do you want a-
31		do you want that in a bag? q>
32	TJ02:	sure,
33		yes please thank you.
34		*Audience laughter*
		[...]
35	DA01:	@@
36		like what --
37	DA01:	[x-]
38	**TJ02:**	**[what] do they want,**
39		**a box?**
40		(0.4)
41	AUDI:	*Laughter by single audience member* (1.1)
42	DA01:	i don't know what he wants,
43		it's like --
44		he just wanted to know what the other options were,
45		(0.4)
46	AUDI:	*Laughter by single audience member* (0.2)
47	DA01:	i [told] --
48	**TJ02:**	**[like] a cloth-**
49		**like a cloth sack?**
50	AUDI:	*Audience laughter* (2.3)
51	DA01:	yeah i guess so,
52		(0.2)
53		yeah.
54		**or gift-wrapped or some-?**
55	TJ02:	gift-wrapped?
56	**DA01:**	**yeah you want it in --**
57		**in a --**
58		**s-**
59		**yeah a --**

60 s-
61 yeah,
62 in- in-
63 inside a human?

The sequence of suggestions offered by the two performers starts with the rather conventional suggestion “a box” and becomes increasingly absurd. The series of false starts in lines 56 to 62 that precede the final suggestion, “inside a human”, indicates that the performer struggled with the constraints of real-time language production in creating a suitable continuation to the sequence of options they had proposed already.

Such patterns of offering series of alternatives that are more extreme or absurd than the previous suggestion can be found throughout the performances of *TJ & Dave*. They are part of a more general strategy known as heightening, which consists of making ideas “bigger, more important or more extreme” (Harvard and Wahlberg, 2017, p. 66). This strategy can be used, for instance, to drive a scene forward by increasing the consequences of the events for the characters (see also Bednarek, 2012, pp. 56–57; Sawyer, 2003, pp. 94–95; Spolin, 1999, pp. 360–361). These patterns are reminiscent of patterns of joint fantasising that have been described for spontaneous conversation (Kotthoff, 2007, 2009). Based on informal conversations among friends, Kotthoff (2007, pp. 278–283) describes joint fantasising as the collaborative creation of “coherent scenes through the incremental structuring and augmentation of unreality” (2007, p. 278). A study by Chovanec (2012) on a live text commentary in the online version of *The Guardian* found similar patterns, indicating that this could be a more general pattern for constructing humorous exchanges.

Excerpt 7 presents an example of joint fantasising described by Kotthoff. The excerpt comes from a conversation in German, which was translated into English by Kotthoff (2009, pp. 202–203). The example is reproduced here in a slightly shortened form. The conversation revolves around small children's widespread habit of spitting out food. Different solutions of how to deal with this in order to minimise the resulting mess are suggested by the participants. The relevant lines creating the collective heightening of the imagined scenarios are presented in bold.

Excerpt 7: Conversational interaction, quoted from Kotthoff (2009, pp. 202–203). Original conversation in German, English translation given by Kotthoff. Emphasis by the author

German (original)

11 M: °is dann bEsser im BAdezimmer füttern.°
12 L: ja? (- -) also ICH hätt mich im bAdezimmer
13 kfü(h)ttert,
14 we(h)nn ich mei(h)ne MU(h)Tter kwe(h)sen wä(h)r.
15 ich hätt, ich würd ihr das auch nicht
16 ↑Übelnehmen.°im nachhinein he.°
17 S: am bEsten in die DUsche ste[llen.
18 ?: [hehehe
19 P: ne DUSCHkabine, ja.
20 S: UND nach dem essen schnell die [DUsche
21 anstellen.
22 m: [hahahaha
23 hahahaha
24 M: in die DUSCHkabine, ja
25 C: [oder nO besser bei laufendem WASser.
26 P: [hast alles wieder AUSkspuckt oder was?
27 S: so wie in die laBORS [mit der glaswand
28 L: [meine mutter hat
29 den löffel hiNEINkstopft und kfragt,
30 SCHMECKTS denn? ich hab angeblich an breites
31 GRINsen aufksetzt,
32 ksatg, ömhöm, pfffff hehehe[hehehehehe
33 m: [hahaha[hahaha
34 P: [über die
LAUTsprecheranlag.
35 a löfferl fürn PA:pa, a löfferl für die MA:ma.
36 S: des kann i ma garnet VORstellen,
37 dass du des essen alles AUSkspuckt hast.
38 L: [gell?
39 M: [und der rote Rübensaft schmückt auf einmal die
weiße wand.
40 C: [na, des versteh ich sowieSO nicht, warum man KINdern
41 nicht nur was WEIßes zum essen [gibt. hehehehehe
42 m: [hehehehehehehehehehehe
43 M: aber immer spiNAT. unhamlich GRÜN.
44 C: GIPSbrei.
45 G: intraveNÖS am besten.

English translation

11 M: °then is better to feed children in the bathroom.°
12 L: really? (- -) well I would have fed myself
13 in the bathroom,

14 if I were my mother.
15 I would have, would not hold that
16 against her. ¨in retrospect he.˚
17 S: best of all put in the sho[wer.
18 ?: [hehehe
19 P: in the shower stall, yeah.
20 S: AND after eating quickly turn on
21 the [shower.
22 m: [hahahaha
23 hahahaha
24 M: in the shower stall, yeah
25 C: [or even better under running water.
26 P: [you have spat everything out again, or what?
27 S: like in the laboratories[with a glass wall
28 L: [my mother stuffed
29 the spoon in and asked,
30 does it taste good then? I apparently smiled
31 broadly,
32 said, emhem, pffffff hehehe[hehehehehe
33 m: [hahaha[hahaha
34 P: [on the
loudspeaker system.
35 a spoonful for PA:pa, a spoonful for the MA:ma.
36 S: I cannot imagine that at all,
37 that you spat out all the food.
38 L: [really?
39 M: [and the red beet juice suddenly decorates
the white wall.
40 C: [well, I don't understand that anyway, why you
41 don't give children just white things[to eat. hehehehehe
42 m: [hehehehehehehehe
43 M: but always spinach. incredibly green.
44 C: plaster mush.
45 C: best of all intravenously.

The first solution presented in Excerpt 7, feeding children in the bathroom (11), is still quite reasonable compared to the later suggestions. This is followed by feeding them in the shower (17), turning on the shower once they have finished eating (20–21), feeding them under running water (25) and adding a glass wall for protection (27). After a short break, during which one of the participants shares a personal anecdote, two more suggestions are added, namely feeding children only white foods (40–41) and feeding them intravenously (45). Comparing Excerpt 7 to the passage from the improvised theatre performance in Excerpt 6, several parallels can be observed. In both cases, different participants take turns to contribute suggestions, thus creating a scenario collaboratively. Moreover, the suggestions become increasingly unreal or absurd, and this absurdity creates humour.

This comparison suggests that the co-construction of humorous exchanges through the collaborative heightening of a given idea is a practice that is common to both spontaneous conversation and improvised theatre. Again, the question is to what extent such patterns can also be found in telecinematic discourse. Indeed, looking at television series, one can find interactions that show similarities, such as the following exchange from the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* (Excerpt 8). In this episode, Sheldon wants to move out from the flat he shares with his roommate Leonard. When Leonard tells their friends Raj and Howard about it, they make a series of suggestions of what Leonard might have done to provoke such an untypical reaction from Sheldon.

Excerpt 8: Interaction from TV Series *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 2, Episode 1, "The Bad Fish Paradigm". Transcription based on https://bigbangtrans.wordpress.com/series-2-episode-01-the-bad-fish-paradigm

01 **Raj: What did you do? Did you change the contrast or brightness settings on the television?**
02 Leonard: No.
03 **Raj: Did you take a band aid off in front of him?**
04 Leonard: No.
05 **Howard: Did you buy generic ketchup, forget to rinse the sink, talk to him through the bathroom door?**
06 **Raj: Adjust the thermostat, cook with cilantro, pronounce the "t" in "often"?**
07 Leonard: No.
08 **Howard: Did you make fun of trains?**

Like the examples from improvised theatre and spontaneous conversation, Excerpt 8 includes turns by different participants, each adding new suggestions to previous contributions. However, in contrast to the previous examples, this passage is only apparently co-constructed in a turn-by-turn fashion. In spontaneous conversation and in improvised theatre, participants have to create a response to a turn contributed by another participant in real time. Each contribution involves a change to a new creator, who tries to surpass or at least match the previous contribution and each contributor controls only their own turns. In contrast, in television series, the entire sequence is composed by the same (team of) screenwriter(s). Even if several individuals are involved in the creation process, they collectively create all the turns included in the sequence, not only those by a single character. Thus, there is no sequential co-construction in the same way in which we can find it in spontaneous

conversation and improvised theatre. Another difference concerns the higher density of the relevant turns. The example from improvised theatre included several repetitions and false starts, and the example from spontaneous conversation even included an anecdote only loosely related to the co-constructed scenario. In contrast, the example from *The Big Bang Theory* presents a more condensed dialogue, in which every word is directly relevant to the co-constructed exchange. This is a direct consequence of the opportunity to revise and refine dialogue in the creation of TV series.

In her extensive study of conversational strategies, Tannen (2007) states as her premise that "literary (in the sense of artfully developed) genres elaborate and manipulate strategies that are spontaneous in conversation" (Tannen, 2007, p. 86). If one compares the three extracts from spontaneous conversation, improvised theatre, and TV series, there appears to be a cline that corresponds with Tannen's claim. The passage from improvised theatre is more focused on heightening the central idea than the passage from spontaneous conversation, but it is still far less refined in this respect than the passage from the television series *The Big Bang Theory*. Studying such passages in a more systematic manner across different settings offers opportunities to demonstrate the continuities between spontaneous conversation and literary discourse, along the lines of Tannen's premise. Improvised theatre can fill a crucial gap in such an analysis, given that it combines characteristics of spontaneous language production with characteristics of fiction.

5. Conclusion

This study identified and discussed three humour strategies that are typical of improvised theatrical fiction: Metafictional frame breaking, non-contrived humour, and the co-construction of humorous exchanges. All three strategies are closely related to aspects of the participation framework that set improvised theatre apart from scripted fiction. Metafictional frame breaking is facilitated by the co-presence of the audience during text creation, which leads to a lower degree of immersion compared to many types of scripted fiction. In addition, the performers unite both the roles of actors, impersonating characters, and of text producers, making narrative decisions, which makes it possible to reference the process of text construction from within the fictional text. Non-contrived humour becomes likely through the temporal proximity between text production and reception, resulting in the absence of time for planning and editing. And the co-construction of humorous exchanges is made possible by the performers' shared responsibility for the fictional text, as well as by their ability of reacting to audience responses during text creation. Nevertheless, I have shown that these strategies are not exclusive to improvised theatre. All of them can, in some form, be observed in scripted fiction, too.

The focus of this study lies on the connection between the participation framework and humour strategies. Studying improvised fiction in comparison to scripted fiction makes it possible to observe differences in humour strategies that can be related to differences in the participation framework of the respective forms of communication. This indicates that the participation framework provides relevant clues for understanding how humour strategies can develop that are specific to given forms of communication. At the same time, it can also help us understand the connection between (slightly different realisation of) humour strategies across different forms of communication, such as the connection between collaborative strategies in spontaneous conversation and the strategy of presenting a condensed version of the heightening of a humorous idea in a sequence of turns by different fictional characters in television series. Improvised theatre, as a form of communication that is both spontaneously produced and fictional, can provide the "missing link" in the process of the development of literary strategies as an elaboration of conversational strategies. This indicates that additional research on improvised theatre is highly desirable. Not only will it serve to amend the almost exclusive bias towards scripted data in linguistic research on fiction, but it will also lead to new insight on the connection between linguistic strategies in (scripted) fiction and in spontaneous conversation.

It goes without saying that the three strategies I described in this paper are not the only strategies for creating humour in improvised theatre. Many additional strategies can be used by improvisers, and it can be expected that the vast majority of humour strategies used in telecinematic discourse can also occur in improvised theatre. Moreover, further research is needed to compare humour strategies across a wider range of forms of comedy – including, for instance, scripted sketches, stand-up comedy, scripted comedic theatre and musicals. One specific aspect that deserves further attention is the contribution by the audience to the construction of humorous sequences in improvised theatre. In the case of *TJ & Dave*, interaction between the performers and the audience is very limited. Contributions by the audience are restricted to laughter and a few instances of other forms of non-verbal feedback, such as emotional sounds. This is different for many other groups of performers. For instance, in the performances of *Middleditch and Schwartz*, which have recently been released on Netflix, the improvised show is preceded by an extensive exchange with selected audience members. The audience members are asked to share special moments from their lives and these events form the inspiration for the improvised show. As a consequence, the audience plays a more central role in the construction of the fictional narrative and its humour. The analysis of such differences across different groups of improvisers and different styles of improvisation as well as their effect on humour strategies deserve further attention.

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